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RELIVING the past in order to come to terms with it may be acceptable therapeutic technique—but it's hardly the way to conduct foreign affairs.

Yet that's what the Reagan administration often seems to be doing. It reaches into the past for foreign policies as if everything that went wrong in the last 25 years or so can be erased by doing the same things over again to prove that they can work after all.

First we had El Salvador, where

By Arnold R. Isaacs

the secretary of State gave the impression he wanted to try Vietnam again to make it come out right. Now there's the Central Intelligence Agency's reported scheme to get rid of Libya's strongman, Muammar El Kadhafi.

On El Salvador, much of what was said by Secretary of State Alexander Haig and by other top-level spokesmen was breathtakingly unconnected with any of the real issues in that unhappy country.

A few knowledgeable journalists tried to explain some of the significant background, and so did Robert White, the holdover U.S. ambassador. Mr. White could have explained, if anyone were listening, that military aid was unlikely to strengthen a well-meaning but weak civilian regime like the Salvadoran junta; in Latin America, armies have traditionally seen themselves not as servants of civilian authority but as protectors of a national mystique that must be guarded against the grubbiness of civilian politics.

Such inconvenient realities were not welcomed by Mr. White's superiors, however. From all available evidence, what concerned Mr. Haig was showing that America has recovered from Vietnam and is again prepared to intervene in the world against Soviet mischief. For that purpose no one need care about Salvadoran circumstances. The uprising could just as easily have been in Borneo, or Burundi.

For his efforts to relate policy to

Hairy Chested Nostalgia

local reality, Mr. White was canned. Most of the press, meanwhile, was as mesmerized as Secretary Haig, though perhaps for different reasons, with facile but misleading comparison of El Salvador with Vietnam.

As soon as the single word "advisers" entered the story, with its inevitable echo of America tip-toeing into Indochina, most other issues that should have been explored in the press and on television were smothered.

The same policy-as-psychotherapy impulse seems to have inspired the Libyan "destabilization" program, which reportedly won the endorsement of CIA Director William Casey and of a White House panel under Vice President Bush before protests from alarmed members of the House Intelligence Committee forced the administration to take a second look.

While the plan was still alive, though, it must have had great appeal. Consider: No more fighting the Cold War with one hand behind the back; no more Mr. Nice Guy. The CIA as representative of American will and power would again be feared, as when it arranged the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran or the leftist Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala.

It sounds tempting. But the world has changed since the heyday of clandestine operators. In the early 1950s the United States was unchallengeably dominant in the non-Communist world. Even when the CIA's footprints were too large to be hidden, as happened in Guatemala, few countries of any importance to Washington had the inclination to protest the agency's actions, or were in a position to do so even if they were so inclined.

Today that is no longer true. Even if a dangerous or unfriendly govern-

ment could be toppled as handily as was Mr. Arbenz's 27 years ago, there are a lot more governments now, including many with diplomatic or economic significance to the U.S., that would be angered or threatened—and would have no inhibitions about saying so.

It's worth remembering, too, that the triumphs of the past don't always look quite so beneficial from the vantage point of history.

If you overthrow somebody's government, they have a habit of holding you responsible for whatever happens afterward, as we have recently been reminded in Iran.

The upheavals there since 1979 did not spring from any single root event, obviously. But Iranians remember, even if most Americans don't, that it was the CIA-run coup in 1953 that let the Shah rule as well as reign. That memory certainly is connected with the detonations that proved so damaging to American purposes a quarter-century later.

Similarly, it is far from proven that the CIA's shenanigans in Guatemala in the 1950s were ultimately for the good of either Guatemala or the United States.

Virtually without interruption since the Arbenz regime was ousted by CIA-backed rightists in 1954, Guatemala has been misgoverned by a succession of right-wing military governments while being brutalized by terrorism from both right and left that has taken tens of thousands of lives. In the violence, all efforts at social and political reform have been stunted, and the country is being propelled toward a grim day of reckoning.

Whatever the real or imagined outcomes of those past episodes, however, and whatever the fantasies of old and new cold warriors in the Reagan administration, there is no going back. Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it, George Santayana wrote. The same can be said, perhaps, of those who remember but do not understand.

Mr. Isaacs, a former correspondent for The Sun in Asia and Latin America, is writing a book on Vietnam.